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Column 2

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WRITE? YOU'RE WRONG

In the recent furor over the assassination of President McKinley, it may have escaped your notice that a nationwide study of the writing ability of American college students has just been published.

The survey reveals an astonishing fact: that when students have completed their freshman year and are no longer required to take English, their writing skill progressively declines until we come to the fantastic situation where *graduating seniors actually are poorer writers of English than incoming freshmen!*

Many theories have been offered to account for this incredible fact. Some say that seniors know less English than freshmen because all seniors major in French. This is not true. No more than 94 percent of seniors major in French. How about the other six percent?

Well sir, of the six percent, half—or three percent—take physics, and it is not hard to understand how these poor souls grow rusty in English when all they ever say is "E equals MC squared."

Of the remaining three percent, two-thirds—or two percent—major in whaling, and their English too grows feeble with disuse. Whalers, as we all know, do not speak at all except to shout, "Thar she blows!" maybe twice a year.

Of the one percent remaining, it cannot be fairly said that they are poor writers. The fact is, we don't know what kind of writers they are. Why not? Because they never write. And why don't they ever write? Because this remaining one percent of American college students are enrolled at the University of Alaska, and never take their mittens off.

(Incidentally, I received quite a surprise upon first visiting Alaska two years ago when I was invited to Juneau to crown the Queen of the annual Date Palm Festival. Frankly I expected to find a surly and morose populace. After all, going through life with your mittens on all the time is hardly calculated to make you merry as a cricket. Not only can't you write, but you miss out on all kinds of other fun things—like three card monte, making shadow pictures on the wall, and lint picking. However, to my astonishment, I discovered Alaskans to be a hale and gregarious group, mittens notwithstanding, and I soon found out why: because mittens notwithstanding, they could still smoke Marlboro Cigarettes, still enjoy that rich mellow flavor, that fine, clean Selectrate filter, that truly soft soft pack, that truly flip-top flip-top box—and that, friends, will make anybody happy, mittens notwithstanding. In fact, Alaskans are the happiest people I have ever met in the whole United States—except, of course, for the Alaskan vendors of Marlboro Cigarettes, who have not been paid in many years—indeed, never—because how can anybody dig out coins to pay for cigarettes when he is wearing mittens?)

But I digress. What are we going to do about this deplorable condition where college students, having completed Freshman English, become steadily less proficient in the use of the language? The answer is simple. We will make them take Freshman English all through college. In fact, we won't let them take anything else! This solution, besides producing a nation of graceful writers, will also solve another harrowing problem: where to park on campus. If everybody takes nothing but Freshman English, we can tear down all the schools of law, medicine, engineering, and whaling, and turn them into parking lots. Can't we?

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The makers of Marlboro, who sponsor this column, plead guilty to being among those Americans whose writing skill is not all it might be. However, we like to think that as tobacconists we know a thing or two. Won't you try us and see if you agree?

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